

**IN THE CLAIMS**

This listing of the claims replaces all prior versions of the claims in the application.

1-10. (canceled)

11. (currently amended): A method for detecting hepatitis C virus (HCV) in a mammalian host within the first six months of HCV infection, comprising the steps of:

(a) obtaining, from the host within the first six months of HCV infection, a body component suspected of containing antibodies to HCV;

(b) contacting said body component with a purified HCV antigen ~~selected from the group consisting of an antigen encoded in the E1 domain of an HCV genome, an antigen encoded in the E2 domain of an HCV genome, and aggregates thereof~~, wherein said HCV antigen comprises an E1/E2 heterodimer, wherein said HCV antigen is purified under non-denaturing conditions and said contacting is performed under conditions that allow an immunological reaction to occur, whereby detectable antibody/antigen complexes are formed; and

(c) detecting the presence of said antibody/antigen complexes, thereby detecting the presence of HCV in the mammalian host within the first six months of infection.

12-18. (canceled)

19. (currently amended): The method of ~~any of~~ claims 11-18 wherein said HCV antigen ~~or aggregate~~ is expressed from recombinant vaccinia virus.

20. (currently amended): The method of ~~any of~~ claims 11-18 wherein said HCV antigen ~~or aggregate~~ is expressed in CHO cells.

21. (currently amended): A kit for use in the method according to ~~any of~~ claims 11-18, wherein said kit comprises said HCV antigen and a positive control standards comprising antibodies to HCV or a negative control standard not containing antibodies to HCV, packaged in suitable vials and instructions for use of the kit components.

22. (currently amended): The method of claim ~~13~~ 11, wherein ~~said~~ the HCV E1 antigen in the E1/E2 heterodimer comprises amino acids 192-383, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence.

23. (currently amended): The method of claim ~~14~~ 11, wherein ~~said~~ the HCV E2 antigen in the E1/E2 heterodimer comprises amino acids 384 to 800, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence.

24. (currently amended): The method of claim ~~14~~ 11, wherein said HCV E2 antigen in the E1/E2 heterodimer comprises amino acids 383 to 661, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence.

25. (currently amended): The method of claim ~~16~~ 11, wherein said E1/E2 heterodimer ~~aggregate~~ comprises amino acids 192-800, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence.

26. (currently amended): The method of claim 24, wherein said HCV ~~E2~~ antigen is expressed in CHO cells.

27. (currently amended): The method of claim 25, wherein said E1/E2 heterodimer ~~aggregate~~ is expressed from recombinant vaccinia virus.

28-29. (canceled)

30. (previously presented): The method of claim 11, wherein the HCV antigen comprises amino acids 1-966, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence and the antigen is expressed from a recombinant vaccinia virus.

31. (currently amended): The method of claim 11, wherein the HCV ~~envelope~~ antigen comprises amino acids 383 to 661, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence and the antigen is expressed in CHO cells.

32. (previously presented): The method of claim 11, wherein the HCV antigen is expressed from a recombinant vaccinia virus encoding amino acids 1-966, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence.

33. (currently amended): The method of claim 11, wherein the HCV ~~envelope~~ antigen consists of amino acids 383 to 661, numbered relative to the HCV-1 sequence and the antigen is expressed in CHO cells.

34-38. (canceled)